Results of the 2002 Bay Area Atheist/Humanist Study

First of all, we want to thank Chris Lindstrom of the Atheists of Silicon Valley for initiating this study, and for doing so much to make it work. This research project just wouldn't have happened without her input and output, and the help of the five clubs that mailed our surveys to a random sample of their members.

Secondly, we express our deep appreciation to all who answered our questions. Because confirmed atheists had never been studied like this before, we felt this was a wonderful opportunity and put about everything into our booklet that we could think of. (You can tell how long the survey was by how many pages it takes to give the results!) Many who received our questionnaire were probably deterred by the investment of time involved, and that points out how helpful and motivated those kind folks were who splendidly answered everything we asked--and often put in much appreciated explanations and comments in even smaller writing than we used.

Thirdly, this self-selection factor makes it clear that the results you are about to see *cannot be generalized to the clubs themselves, much less to "atheists in the Bay Area," much less to "American atheists."* These are just the answers that *some* members of atheist/humanist clubs in the San Francisco area gave. We are sure that if everyone had responded to our survey, or that if we somehow could magically have heard from all the nonbelievers in the Bay Area (club members or not), or even more impossibly if we had heard from a representative sample of nonbelievers across the nation, the results would be different, and probably very different in many cases.

Sample Characteristics

We sent 600 questionnaires to be distributed among the five clubs' memberships. By the end of August we had received surveys back from 304 persons. However eight of these returned surveys were largely unanswered. So we ended up with a workable sample of 296. The respondents were predominantly male (69%), well-aged (median = 60 years), and very well-educated (median = 17 years--an astounding figure in light of how rarely persons finished college and attended graduate school "back then." [We are 62 and 55 years old ourselves, so we appreciate the maturity of the sample.] The other "demographic" question we asked at the end of the survey concerned national political party preference. A solid majority (63%) of the respondents said they were Democrats; in second place came "Independent" (17%) followed by "Other" (12%) which was usually identified as the Green Party. (A few respondents did not answer one or another of these questions. Here and throughout this report, the statistics cited are based on those who did.)

Are the Respondents Really Atheists?

The survey began with a series of questions intended to verify that the respondent was indeed a nonbeliever in the "traditional" God.

A. *People have different concepts of "God." Do you believe in a supernatural power, a deity:*

That is a thinking, self-aware being, not just some physical force like the "Big Bang."	___ No ___ Yes
That is almighty, can do anything it decides to do?	___ No ___ Yes
That is eternal: always was, and always will be?	___ No ___ Yes
That intentionally created the universe for its own purposes?	___ No ___ Yes
That is constantly aware of our individual lives and hears our prayers?	___ No ___ Yes
That is all-loving and all-good?	___ No ___ Yes
That will judge us after we die, sending some to Heaven and others to Hell?	___ No ___ Yes

Virtually everyone answered "No" to all of these questions. The smallest percentage of "No" answers (93%) occurred to the question about "That is eternal..." At least 97% said "No" to each of the other questions.

We continued with more questions to establish the religious identity of the sample.

B. *Assume the descriptions above comprise the "traditional" concept of God in our culture. Do you believe in it?*
___ I am an **atheist**. I do not believe in the existence of this "traditional" God. I believe it does *not* exist.
___ I am an **agnostic**. I do not believe in the existence of this "traditional" God, *nor* do I disbelieve in it.
___ I am a **theist**. I believe in the existence of this "traditional" God.

86% said they were atheists, and 14% said they were agnostics.

Elaboration: What name/term do you personally prefer to use to describe yourself (e.g. humanist, atheist, non-believer, un-believer, non-theist, heretic)? _____

45% said they preferred to be called "atheists," and 33% had some reference to "humanist" in their self-description. Other self-labels, cited less frequently, were "agnostic," "non-theist," "non-believer," and "a truth-seeking devotee of rationality and beauty."

C. If you do not believe in the "traditional" God, *is there any sense in which you do believe in "God*?" If so, would you please describe what kind of God or supernatural being or supernatural force that you DO believe in? Does this being play an active role in human lives? (If so, how?)

We wondered if some people who did not believe in the traditional God still felt there was some kind of "god" in the universe. Only a few (9%) said "yes," and their elaborations (e.g., "Nature," "Life Force") indicated this was a far cry from the traditional God.

Finally, we also solicited answers to a 20-issue "Doubts Scale," which asked:

To what extent did doubts about each of the following affect you and lead you to your current viewpoint on religion? That is, to what extent have you had doubts about religion, serious concerns about the basic truth of religion, because of the following?

____ 1. The existence of God, an all-good, all-powerful supreme being who created the universe.
____ 2. The problem of evil and unfair suffering in the world.
____ 3. The history of religion; bad things religions did in the past.
et cetera

Each item was answered on a 0-6 basis, so summed scores over all 20 issues could range from 0 to 120, with 60 being the midpoint. In our experience, people do not usually have many doubts on these issues. But the median score in this sample was 73-- the highest we have ever found. The item with the highest score read, "Religious teachings often did not make sense; they seemed contradictory, or unbelievable."

In conclusion, we are convinced that the sample consists of deep-down, "I mean it when I say it" nonbelievers.

How Did They Become Nonbelievers?

We next solicited answers to another of our standard measures, the Religious Emphasis scale

D. *To what extent did you have a "religious upbringing"?* That is, to what extent, adding it all up, did the important people in your life--such as your parents, teachers, and church officials (if any)--do the following as you were growing up?

____ 1. Emphasize attending religious services as acts of personal devotion?
____ 2. Review the teachings of the religion at home?
____ 3. Make religion the center, the most important part of your life?

There are 20 such aspects of life on the scale, each again answered on a 0-6 basis, so the minimum total possible would be 0, the maximum 120, and the midpoint of the scale would be 60.

The answers very definitely clustered on the "non-religious upbringing" end of the scale. The median score equaled 18, meaning most of the respondents had very low totals of less than 20. So *most of the respondents came from very nonreligious backgrounds.* At the other extreme, only 4% scored 100 or higher. If we take 80 as a minimum score for having had a "very religious background," only 11% of the respondents came from such an environment. To be sure, these "amazing apostates" are quite interesting people, having gone against their strong upbringing. But most of the sample apparently had a much easier journey to nonbelief. Religion was hardly mentioned while they were growing up.

Does this mean that most atheists were raised by atheist parents? Not in this sample, judging by the answers to:

1. *In what religion, if any, were you raised*? (e.g., Baptist, Episcopalian, Hindu, etc.) _____
2. Was either of your parents an atheist or an agnostic? (Circle if so) Father Mother
3. Was any of your grandparents an atheist or an agnostic? None One Two Three Four

Only 15% of the sample said there was *no* home religion. Instead, respondents came from a variety of Judeo-Christian homes. 11% had fundamentalist Protestant backgrounds, 12% came from Jewish homes, and 22% said their homes were Catholic. (The first and the last percentages probably *under*-represent the religion's demographic share of the American population, while persons with Jewish backgrounds are appreciably *over*-represented in this study.) Some 35% of the respondents *did* have at least one atheist or agnostic parent, which is probably a contributing factor toward rejecting religion, even when the other parent has a religious affiliation. But whatever the name of the family religion, the Religious Emphasis scale results make it clear the respondents' upbringings were usually nonreligious.

1. *Do you presently consider yourself a member of an organized religion,* or associated with one in some way?
2. If so, what religion (e.g., Catholic, Lutheran, Judaism, etc.)? _____
3. How often do you attend church in an average month? _____ times in an average month.

It won't surprise many people that these members of an atheist/humanist club tended (83%) not to belong to any religion. The 17% who said they do have a religion usually named Humanism as their "faith."

Personal Accounts

We invited each respondent to tell us his/her individual story through a series of questions patterned after our study of "amazing apostates"---students who had come from very religious backgrounds, but had dropped the family faith (Altemeyer, B. & Hunsberger, B.,1997, "Amazing Conversions," Prometheus Press). The stories from the Bay Area respondents were often very interesting--and sometimes incredible--and many gave us detailed accounts of how they had become nonbelievers. But their hundreds of narratives are naturally difficult to summarize. Here are some of the things that struck us overall, with the understanding that these are just generalizations and many exceptions exist.

Despite their religiously weak backgrounds, most (76%) of the respondents said they had once been more religious, usually in childhood. Serious doubts began to arise during adolescence (median = 15, although the range here was extraordinary, from 5 to 70). A great variety of issues started these doubts, but in general they were idea-oriented (such as the plausibility of the Bible), not personal (e.g., the death of a loved one). Most (76%) did not ask anyone for help or advice about their doubts, but instead thought about things for themselves. Books (for example by Bertrand Russell) rather than associates (such as atheist friends) contributed to their growing disbelief. Most decided they were atheists/agnostics before they were 20

(median = 19), but again the range was fantastic (5 to 72).

We asked if becoming a nonbeliever had cost the respondent anything. Most (53%) said it had created at least some difficulty in relationships with relatives and friends. Sometimes complete breaks occurred, but "strains" were more common. On the other hand, most (59%) said becoming an atheist had *not* cost them in any other way. Occasionally respondents attributed this to living in the San Francisco area, saying they knew it was different in other parts of the United States.

Measures of Zealousness, Dogmatism, and Religious Ethnocentrism

Most of the rest of the questionnaire involved measures we have employed in the past to study zealousness, dogmatism and religious ethnocentrism among religious fundamentalists. Our goal was simply to see how confirmed atheists would respond to corresponding issues.

Our first measure was based on questions we had asked the "amazing apostates" a few years earlier.

Suppose a teenager came to you for advice about religion. S/he had been raised a Christian, and religion had played a big part in how s/he had been raised. But now this person is having questions about that religion, and wants your advice on what to do.

a. What would you say?
b. Would you want this person to end up believing what you believe?
c. Would you try to lead them to share your beliefs ?

We had found in that previous study that only one of 46 amazing apostates said he would try to turn a budding teenage apostate into a real one. The other 45 said it would have to be up to the young questioner to decide. [In contrast, 21 of 24 "amazing believers" (persons from nonreligious backgrounds who had become devout Christians) wanted an inquiring teenager with no religious training to become a believer.]

In the present study, what the respondents would *say* to a doubting Christian youth usually (59%) promoted apostasy. Typical answers ran along the lines, "I'd tell them why I didn't believe" or "I'd give them a book critical of religion to read." While this is a perfectly natural reaction, and might be sensibly inferred as the reason the doubting youth approached them in the first place ("To get the 'other' side"), it can be contrasted with the other 41% of the responses that typically said things like, "I'd just say, 'Search and make up your own mind,' " and "Get both sides of the story, then decide."

Exactly half of the respondents said they would *want* the troubled teen to become an atheist/agnostic. But most (59%) said they would <u>not</u> try to *lead* the seeking teen to share their beliefs.

One way to summarize these results is to see how many respondents would give one-sided advice, *and* want the person to end up believing as they did, *and* try to accomplish this. The answer is, 29% of the 270 persons who answered all three of these questions would be that "proselytizing." Most, clearly, would <u>not</u> be shooting for a conversion.

In a related vein, we asked our respondents what religious instruction they would give their own children:

To what extent would you want your children to have the same religious beliefs that you have?

___ I would stress my point of view as they were growing up, trying to get them to adopt my views.
___ I would want them to make up their own minds, but I would *not* make religion an important issue. I would not pressure them to believe as I do, *nor* would I purposely have them exposed to traditional teachings.
___ I would want them to make up their own minds, and I *would* try to make it an important issue in their lives. I would try to get them to seriously examine many different points of view on religion
___ I would see to it they received a strong traditional religious education, and hope they accepted those beliefs.

Other: _____

The most common response (55%) was the second; most nonbelievers said they wanted their children to make up their own minds, but they would not make religion an important issue nor expose their children to traditional teachings. In second place (22%) came the third option, which again has the children make up their own minds, but emphasizes religion and promotes a search of the alternatives. Only 21% of the respondents checked the first alternative, indicating they would try to make their children become nonbelievers. Given the age of the sample, many respondents were probably describing what they had, in fact, done in raising their children--as a number of them pointed out.

As yet another measure of proselytizing zeal, we asked respondents:

Suppose a law were passed requiring strenuous teaching in public schools *against* belief in God and religion. Beginning in kindergarten, all children would be taught that belief in God is unsupported by logic and science, and that traditional religions are based on unreliable scriptures and outdated principles. All children would eventually be encouraged to become atheists or agnostics. How would you react to such a law?

___ I think this would be a *bad* law. No particular kind of religious beliefs should be taught in public schools.
___ I think this would be a *good* law. These particular beliefs should be taught in public schools.

This question has its roots in situations presented to introductory psychology students at the University of Manitoba a few years ago--only the issue was compulsory education in Christianity in public schools. In two samples, 48% and 62% of the highly right-wing authoritarian students--who very likely would also have been Christian fundamentalists--endorsed such a plan. [But when other samples were asked if it was all right for Arab countries to force children in public schools to learn Islam, or for Israel to do the same with Judaism, the highly authoritarian Christian students answered with a resounding "nay." Similar results were also obtained with a sample of *parents* of introductory psychology students at the University of Manitoba (Altemeyer, B., 1996: "The Authoritarian Specter," Harvard University Press, Pp. 115-116)].

In the present study, when confirmed atheists were asked if they wanted their point of view taught in public schools, 80% said no, that would be a bad law, no particular kind of religious beliefs should be taught in public schools. 20% said that would be a good law.

In summary, all three measures of proselytizing zeal (advice to a questioning teenager, raising one's own children, and teaching nonbelief in school) showed that only a minority of this sample--about 20-30% across measures--have such an orientation. The solid majority favor, instead, a "let each person decide, 'encourage' nothing on no one" approach to religious beliefs.

Dogmatism

We again tried to measure dogmatism in several ways. First we used a "DOG scale" (Altemeyer, *ibid., Chapter 8)* containing 20 statements such as:

1. Anyone who is honestly and truly seeking the truth will end up believing what I believe.
2. There are so many things we have not discovered yet, nobody should be absolutely certain his beliefs are right.
3. The things I believe in are so completely true, I could never doubt them.

Responses to these statements were invited on a -4 to +4 basis, and for half the items (such as No. 2 above) the dogmatic response is to disagree. The scale has predicted dogmatic behavior among religious persons in a number of studies (e.g., they still insist, after being shown the inconsistencies and contradictions in the four Gospel accounts of Easter morning, that there are *no* inconsistencies and contradictions (Altemeyer, "Dogmatic Behavior Among Students," *Journal of Social Psychology*, in press).

Scores can theoretically range from 20 to 180 on the DOG scale, with 100 being the midpoint. In fact, however, people are not very dogmatic. Parents of introductory psychology students at the university of Manitoba average around 75 (mean). Those parents who also score highly on a measure of religious fundamentalism average about 100 (mean). In the present study of Bay Area atheists, the mean was 85.3.

In all fairness, one has to cut the Bay Area respondents some slack here. A few of the DOG items refer to futures that might not be as relevant to persons in their sixties as they are to university students' parents (who average 48 years of age). Such as, "Twenty years from now, some of my opinions about the important things in life will probably have changed." *Furthermore one must treat comparisons between the present sample and our more usual Canadian ones with heightened caution, as the groups differ in nationality, gender composition, self-selection biases, and many other attributes.*

A second measure of dogmatism was preceded by a statement, "Jesus of Nazareth was divine, the Son of God," which was responded to on a -4("Very Strongly Disagree") to +4 ("Very Strongly Agree") basis. Nearly all the respondents in this study said, "-4." Shortly thereafter the survey presented hypothetical evidence supporting the divinity of Jesus. Supposedly, scientifically validated ancient parchments were found in the Middle East that constituted the Roman "file" on Jesus. The parchments gave eye-witness confirmation of the miracles reported in the Gospels, which painstaking examination could not discredit. Fearing Jesus might be the Messiah, the Romans put him to death. But the file also contains very strong evidence from the Romans' own soldiers that Jesus rose from the dead, and was seen around Palestine afterwards. "Scholars examine the scrolls and eventually pronounce them genuine and unaltered in any way. In short, there apparently was a Jesus of Nazareth, and the story of the Gospels is confirmed by records kept by the government at the time." After reading this narrative, respondents were asked to re-answer the -4 to +4 question about Jesus' divinity.

This story is one of two we have used previously. The second story involves hypothetical ancient parchments that *dis*credit Jesus's very existence, presenting instead supposedly validated evidence that the Gospel stories were taken from earlier Greek myths. Yet if such evidence did appear, most (54%) right-wing authoritarian students said it would have *no effect* whatsoever on their very strong belief in Jesus' divinity. On the other hand, only 33% of the *un*authoritarian students who doubted the existence of Jesus said they would be <u>un</u>affected by the discovery of the "Roman File" used in the Bay Area study.

Most said it would change their beliefs, at least some (Altemeyer, B. *ibid.*, P. 330). So nonbelievers proved less dogmatic than believers in these studies.

In the present study, 61% of the respondents said they would be completely unaffected by discovery of the "Roman file." Explanations sometimes accompanied the second "-4," such as "Anyone knows historical records can be wrong" and "Just because the Romans believed these witnesses, that doesn't make their stories true." Valid points, to be sure. Still, a recurring criticism of Christianity is that all the accounts of Jesus' miracles and resurrection were written decades after his death by people who had witnessed none of the events they reported. If the contemporary "Roman file" were found, it would seem to constitute evidence supporting Christianity on at least that point. Yet in the solid majority of cases in this study, the -4's did not even move to -3's.

As a third approach to measuring dogmatism, we asked:

What would be required, what would have to happen, for you to believe in the "traditional" God described at the beginning of this survey? Are there conceivable events, or evidence, that would lead you to believe? What, for example?

Fifty-two percent of the respondents said yes, they could conceive of events or evidence that would change their minds. The examples cited ranged from "irrefutable miracles" to "the simultaneous, unmistakable, personal experience of this God by every human being on earth." But the other 48% of the sample said there was nothing that could change their mind on this issue.

In summary, the three measures used in this study suggest dogmatism is not incompatible with disbelief. We expected scores on the DOG scale to be much lower, most respondents said they would not be affected at all by discovery of a "Roman file" supporting the gospels, and nearly half said nothing conceivable could change their minds about the existence of the traditional God.

Religious Ethnocentrism

Using a Religious Ethnocentrism scale, we have found that fundamentalists tend to make much stronger "Us vs. Them" distinctions on religious grounds than most people do (Altemeyer, B., "Why Do Religious Fundamentalists Tend To Be Prejudiced?," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, in press). We put six of the items from this scale on the survey sent to the Bay Area clubs, modified when necessary to present the issue from an atheist's point of view. The statements, presented below, were answered on a -4 to +4 basis. For half of the items (such as "I would not mind..."), the ethnocentric response was to disagree. Answers were converted on a 1--9 basis, with a higher score indicating greater religious ethnocentrism.

I would not mind if my child had devoutly religious teachers in elementary school.
All people may be entitled to their own religious beliefs, but I don't want to associate with people whose views are quite different from my own.
I would not mind at all if my son's best friends were all highly religious.
If a politician were deeply religious, I would refuse to vote for him even if I agreed with all his other ideas.
It would not bother me if my children regularly went to some religion's "youth group" with their friends.
If it were possible, I'd rather have a job where I worked with people with the same views about religion

that I have, rather than with people with different views.

When we added up the scores for the items above, we found the average (mean) equaled 32.6--which is a relatively high score in our experience. For example, the mean of a sample of parents of introductory psychology students at the University of Manitoba, answering the "Christian" version of these same items (which has items such as "I would not mind if my child had atheist teachers in elementary school") equaled 22.3. The mean of parents who were religious fundamentalists was 31.8. So the present nonbelievers and those earlier fundamentalists appear to be equally ethnocentric, religiously--except in opposite directions of course.

Another measure of religious ethnocentrism asked respondents to rate various groups on a 0 to 100 basis:

Please rate your ***overall attitude toward*** the groups below, using the "evaluation thermometer" printed to the right. If you have a favorable attitude toward a specific group, you would indicate a score somewhere between 50 degrees and 100 degrees, depending on how favorable your evaluation is of that group. On the other hand, if you have an *un*favorable attitude toward a specific group, you could give them a score somewhere between 0 degrees and 50 degrees, depending on how *un*favorable your evaluation is of that group. The labels provided will help you to locate your rating on the thermometer. However, you are *not* restricted to the numbers indicated--feel free to use any number between 0 degrees and 100 degrees.

100	Extremely favorable
90	Very favorable
80	Quite favorable
70	Fairly favorable
60	Slightly favorable
50	Neither favorable nor unfavorable
40	Slightly unfavorable
30	Fairly unfavorable
20	Quite unfavorable
10	Very unfavorable
0	Extremely unfavorable

1. Christians (40.3) [50.8]
2. Christian fundamentalists (11.5) [14.7]
3. People who believe in a "traditional" God (41.2) [47.6]
4. Atheists (84.2) [64.1]
5. Hindus (46.1) [51.5]
6. People who are not sure, one way or the other, whether the "traditional" God exists (65.0) [74.1]
7. Jews (51.3) [58.4]
8. Jewish fundamentalists (15.0) [18.5]
9. Muslims (38.1) [46.9]
10. Muslim fundamentalists (9.7) [12.7]

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Since the measure has separate listings for "Atheists" and "People who are not sure, one way or the other, whether the 'traditional' God exists," we analyzed the answers separately for those Bay Area nonbelievers who had said they were atheists and those who had said they were agnostics. The numbers in parentheses following each category represent the means of the 243 atheists who answered these items. The numbers that follow in square brackets show the means for the 40 agnostics who responded.

One can find sharp differences in how much nonbelievers like the various groups. Atheists rated other atheists most highly

(84.2), agnostics next (65.0), and then Jews (51.3). After that, you can see that all groups received scores on the "unfavorable" side of the midpoint--although usually by small margins. Agnostics were noticeably less ethnocentric, giving other agnostics their highest score [74.1], then atheists [64.1]. Jews [58.4], Hindus [51.5], and Christians [50.8] all landed on the "favourable" side of the midpoint, if also by small margins. All varieties of "fundamentalists" got very unfavourable ratings by both atheists and agnostics.

We have used this "thermometer" measure in just one other study to date (Jackson, L.M., & Hunsberger, B., *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1999, vol. 38, pp. 509-523). A relatively small sample of Christian fundamentalists (N=63) from the introductory psychology course at Wilfrid Laurier University gave "Atheists" a mean rating of 32.3, while giving "Christians" a mean of 86.7. We did not include "Christian fundamentalists" in that study, but have in a project presently underway.

Other Measures

We included a few other measures in the survey. For example, respondents were asked to indicate, on a -4 to +4 (that is, a 1-9) basis, the extent to which:

> I have personally been discriminated against because of my nonreligious beliefs. (Mean = 4.4)
> In general, people with my nonreligious beliefs are discriminated against in our society. (Mean=6.8)

As has been found in research on racial discrimination, nonbelievers did not report receiving as much discrimination personally as they believe others like them receive.

We also inquired about the marital status of the respondents. Fifty-six percent said they were married or had a long-term partner. (We did not differentiate widowers, divorcees and singles among the unmarrieds.) Of the married respondents, 33% said their partner was an atheist and 25% said the partner was an agnostic. Most (79%) of the few theist partners never attended church. So generally, nonbelievers had sympatico partners.

"Why is There Still Religion?"

A few years ago we asked students' parents to indicate, in 16 different ways, the extent to which religion brought them happiness, joy and comfort. We also asked them to do the same for logic and science. Religion got substantially higher marks overall than science did: on a scale that could run from 0 to 96, religion's mean score was 49.3 while the joys of being scientific came in at 35.6. We concluded that however much religious beliefs may be irrational, and contribute to some of our worst behaviors, religion seemingly satisfies important human needs better than logic and science apparently do (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997, "Amazing Conversions," Pp. 243-247).

We thought logic and science might get higher marks among nonbelievers, so we put the "science measure" in our booklet for the Bay Area nonbelievers:

> Some people cannot accept traditional religious teachings because they require an act of faith. They base their beliefs instead on logic and science. Would you now indicate to what extent logic and science bring you

happiness, joy and comfort in each of the following ways? (Answered on a 0-6 basis)

1. They tell me the purpose of my life. (How much happiness, joy and comfort have logic and science given you through their explanation of the purpose of your life?) (2.93)
2. They provide the surest path we have to the truth. (4.97)
3. They help me deal with personal pain and suffering. (3.10)
4. They enable me to work out my own beliefs and philosophy of life. (4.66)
5. They take away fear of dying. (2.89)
6. They enable me to search for the truth, instead of just memorizing what others say. (5.02)
7. They tell me what is right and wrong. (3.08)
8. They serve as a check on my own biases and wrong ideas. (4.27)
9. They provide an anchor in my life that keeps me from going astray. (3.00)
10. They explain the mysteries of life. (3.75)
11. They help me control evil impulses. (1.89)
12. They have provided satisfying answers to all the questions in life. (2.94)
13 . They make me feel safe. (2.16)
14. They bring me the joy of discovery. (4.82)
15. They reveal how I can live a happy life. (2.89)
16. They give the satisfaction of knowing that my beliefs are based upon objective facts and logic, not an act of faith. (4.76)

The numbers in parentheses show the mean of the responses to that item. If you add them up, you'll see they total 57.13--a much higher rating than we obtained in our parent sample. While it pales before the joy, happiness and comfort that fundamentalist Christian parents said they got from their *religious* beliefs (mean = 75.8), it does demonstrate that logic and science can bring substantial satisfaction in life.

Finally, we put in two items that struck some respondents as very strange, and in a few cases led persons to write down that we were secretly trying to convert them to belief in God. The first went:

Imagine for the sake of argument that you have a "Hidden Observer" in you, which knows your every thought and deed, but which only speaks when it is safe to do so, and when directly spoken to. This question is for your Hidden Observer. "Does this person (that is, you) have ***doubts about her/his "public" stand*** on the existence of God? Does this person actually believe that the traditional God of Judeo-Christian religions really exists?

____ Yes (s)he has secret doubts about her/his "public" stand on the existence of God, which (s)he has kept strictly to herself/himself.
____ Yes, (s)he has doubts about her/his "public stand," but others (such as parents or friends) know (s)he has these doubts.
____ No, (s)he totally believes her/his "public" stand.
____ Other: _____

We asked the question because previous research (Altemeyer, B. "Enemies of Freedom," 1987, Jossey-Bass, Pp. 152-153) had found that about a third of students at the University of Manitoba who professed to believe completely in the traditional God admitted, through their "Hidden Observers," that they actually had secret doubts about God's existence that they had never revealed to anyone. We wondered if some atheists were similarly harboring doubts about their public stand. But the answer is no, they are not. 90% checked off, "No, (s)he totally believes her/his 'public' stand." Only four persons checked off the first answer.

Finally, the item that produced the most negative reaction on the survey, went:

Many people find great comfort in religion. It tells them the purpose of their lives. It helps them deal with pain and suffering. It lessens their fear of death, and indeed promises them life eternal. It tells them what is right and wrong. It provides an anchor, and explains mysteries, and makes them feel safe. And it seems to pay off in various ways. For example, several well-controlled studies have found that, on the average, persons who attend church frequently live longer than those who do not .

If you are an atheist or an agnostic, you probably realized all or most of this long ago. And yet you turn your back on all these benefits. Why? What makes your position so worthwhile that you give up all this? Why can't you believe what most people find it very natural and easy to believe?

The question was based on a similar one we had asked our "amazing apostates" students, whose decision to abandon the family religion had often put them in a very tough spot, personally. Their answer was, in general, that while it would certainly make their lives better in many ways, they could not make themselves believe what did not make sense. They felt they owed it to themselves to go after the truth, whatever it might be, and they had concluded their religious beliefs could not possibly be true. (In fact, we suggested in "Amazing Conversions" that the emphasis which had been placed on the home religion's being "the *true* religion" had unwittingly planted the seeds for apostasy when that religion could not meet the tests for truth.)

The Bay Area atheists and humanists gave many different answers to our question of "Why can't you believe what most people find it very natural and easy to believe." But one theme stood out: 71% of them said, in one way or the other, that it was "unbelievable." It was based on superstition, it was a fairy tale, it was like Santa Claus, it was sheer nonsense, and so on. Even if all the pay-offs were there, the respondents could not make themselves believe what they could not believe. The truth, whatever it is, must be served.

Closing Caveat

In closing, let us emphasize again that these results generalize only at considerable peril. The sample was geographically limited--something we are presently trying to improve upon--and self-selected. And the survey undoubtedly was poorly worded in places and may have given misleading results--something else we are trying to improve. But this *is* the biggest study of confirmed atheists ever undertaken, so far as we know. And whether one likes or dislikes what turned up, it was always, to us, quite interesting. We hope you feel the same. Thank you all so very much.

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